



THE ART OF SPEED

# CLASSIC MOTORCYCLES

PAT HAHN  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TOM LOESER







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## PART I

# The Experimental Years



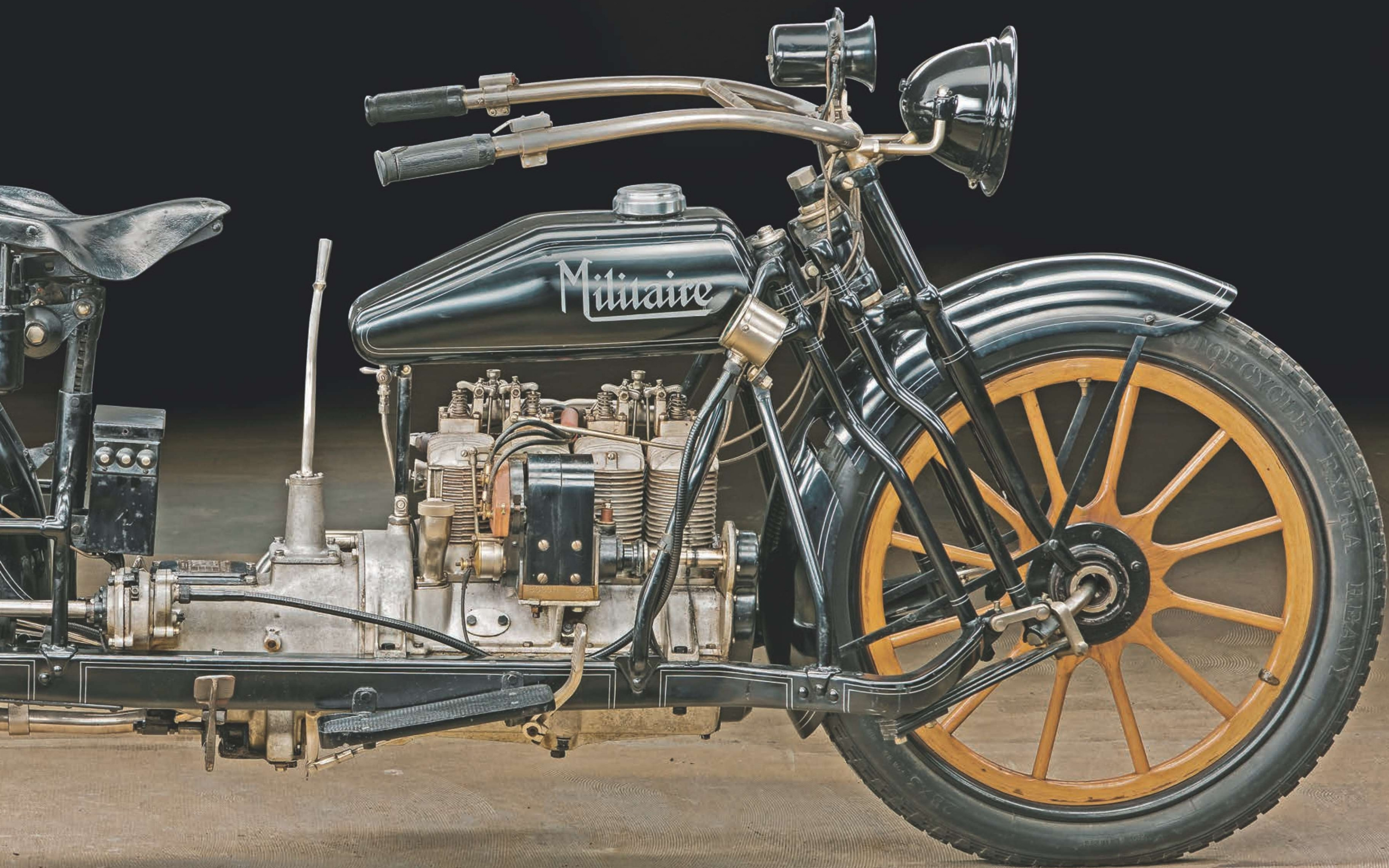
**W**e might think we live in an era of rapidly changing motorcycle technology, but in reality the pace of change today is incremental compared to the early years of motorcycling. While it's an epic sport bike that would trounce the Grand Prix race bikes of old on any track, today's Yamaha YZF R1 has more in common with a thirty-year-old FZR 1000 than it has differences.

In the early days, this was not the case. And that's because the first several decades of motorcycling marked a period of trial and error. There was little orthodoxy in design because no one had yet figured out what did and what did not work. Thus, you had engines produced in every possible size and configuration, from crude De Dion-style single cylinders to complex aircraft-style radial five cylinders, and those engines were utilized in a wild variety of ways, from being mounted in the now-traditional location in the frame cradle to being mounted under the seat, or even, in the case of the above-mentioned radial five-cylinder, in the front wheel.

While most of the innovative designs tried in the early years of motorcycling didn't catch on, usually with good reason (imagine the effect the centripetal force produced by the engine rotating in the front wheel would have on steering!), they did lead to this being the most creative period in motorcycling history, resulting in the production of the most fascinating machines.









# 1915 Militaire Deluxe



These unusual bikes were produced, refined, rereleased, refined, and produced many times over by several different companies, or if you prefer, by several disjointed iterations of the same company. The Militaire Autocycle Company started its motorcycle history building bikes in Cleveland, Ohio. While it looked in many ways just like an ordinary—if long, low, and heavy—motorcycle, the Militaire was originally marketed to the public as a “two-wheeled automobile.” While the bikes were beautiful and well-built, they never sold well compared to the more practical and aesthetically appealing (at the time) machines predicated on bicycle design.

The Militaire was first introduced in 1910 as the mysterious Deluxe from Cleveland. It sported a pressed-steel frame, hub-center steering, and water cooling, all similar to cars of the era, along with outrigger wheels that could be deployed and retracted by the operator when needed and an honest-to-goodness steering wheel. The first generation of the bike had stability problems due to the weight and off-center location of the engine.

The company redesigned the machine and reintroduced it in 1912, still with the hub steering and outrigger wheels, but with a svelte 500cc single F-head transverse engine. In addition to a curved and comfortable bucket seat for the operator, the rear wheel had one of the earliest suspension systems and used a complex swinging arm and leaf spring design, which made the ride even smoother.

Still, riders preferred other types of bikes available at the time, such as the Clevelands, Excelsiors,

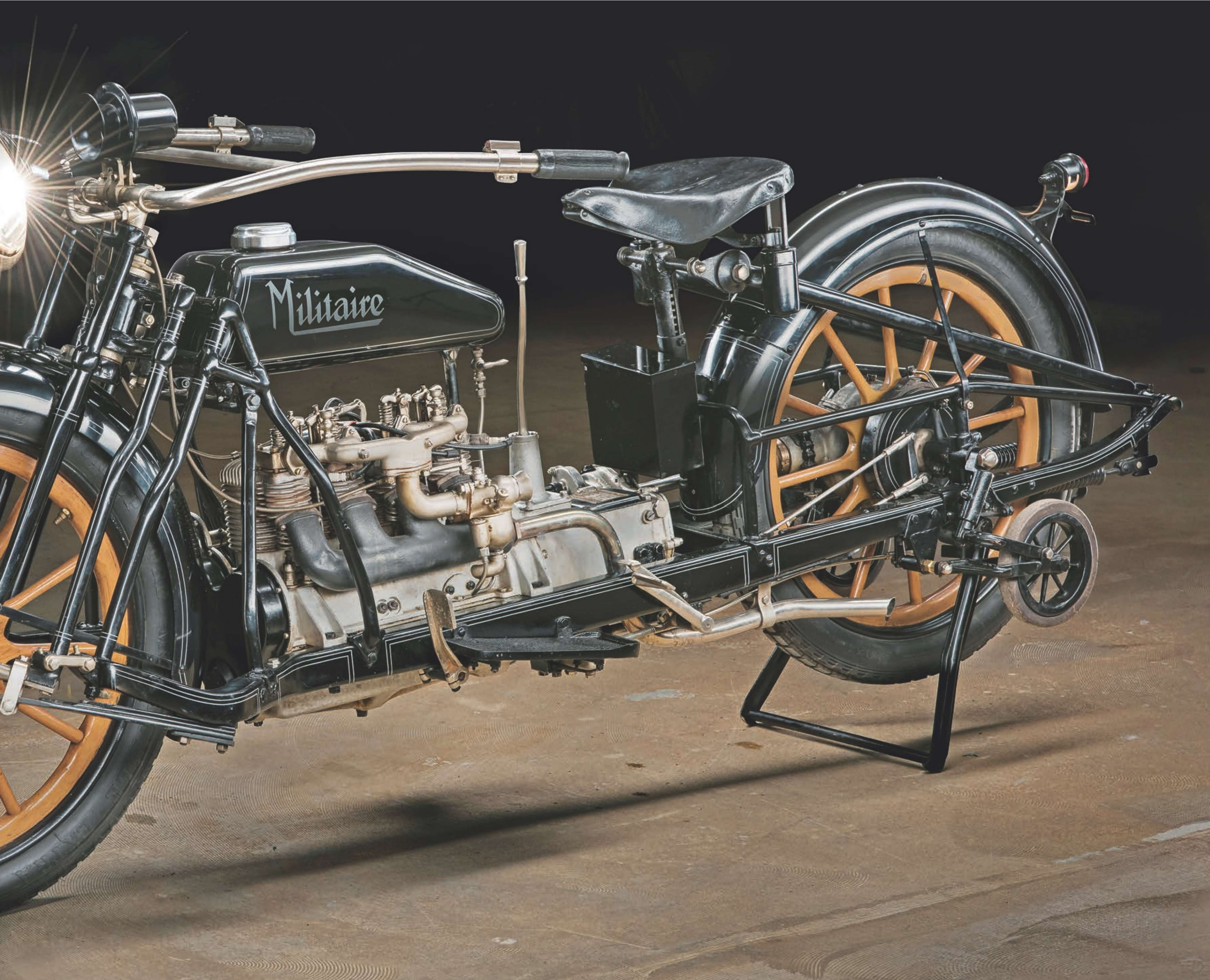
Harleys, and Indians. The Militaire company dissolved and returned in 1914 as Champion Motor Car Company based in St. Louis, Missouri. The next generation of the Deluxe was billed the Champion, with double the cubic centimeters (1,100) and four times the cylinders, with the addition of a three-speed gearbox and shaft drive. Still sporting a steering wheel like a car, this bike didn’t sell either.

The whole works was sold to N. R. Sinclair, moved to Buffalo, New York, and the bike redesigned and badged once again as the Militaire. Finally, in 1915, the bike was given a proper set of handlebars and finally looked and felt like the motorcycle it actually was—not a two-wheeled car. The new design was long, low, and sturdy . . . and ran on wooden wheels. Unsurprisingly, this bike never sold well either, so the design was sold yet again in 1917 to the Militor Corporation in New Jersey and aimed at a military career. Unfortunately, the machine was even less adapted to the mud in the European trenches during World War I, and the whole idea soon folded in the wake of the heavy-hitter manufacturers building more conventional motorcycles. The bike passed through the hands of a couple more hopeful manufacturers before finally being put to bed in the early 1920s.

Marketing ad copy for the Militaire described the bike as safe, silent, graceful, strong, dignified, vibrationless, economical, and comfortable compared to “ordinary” motorcycles.





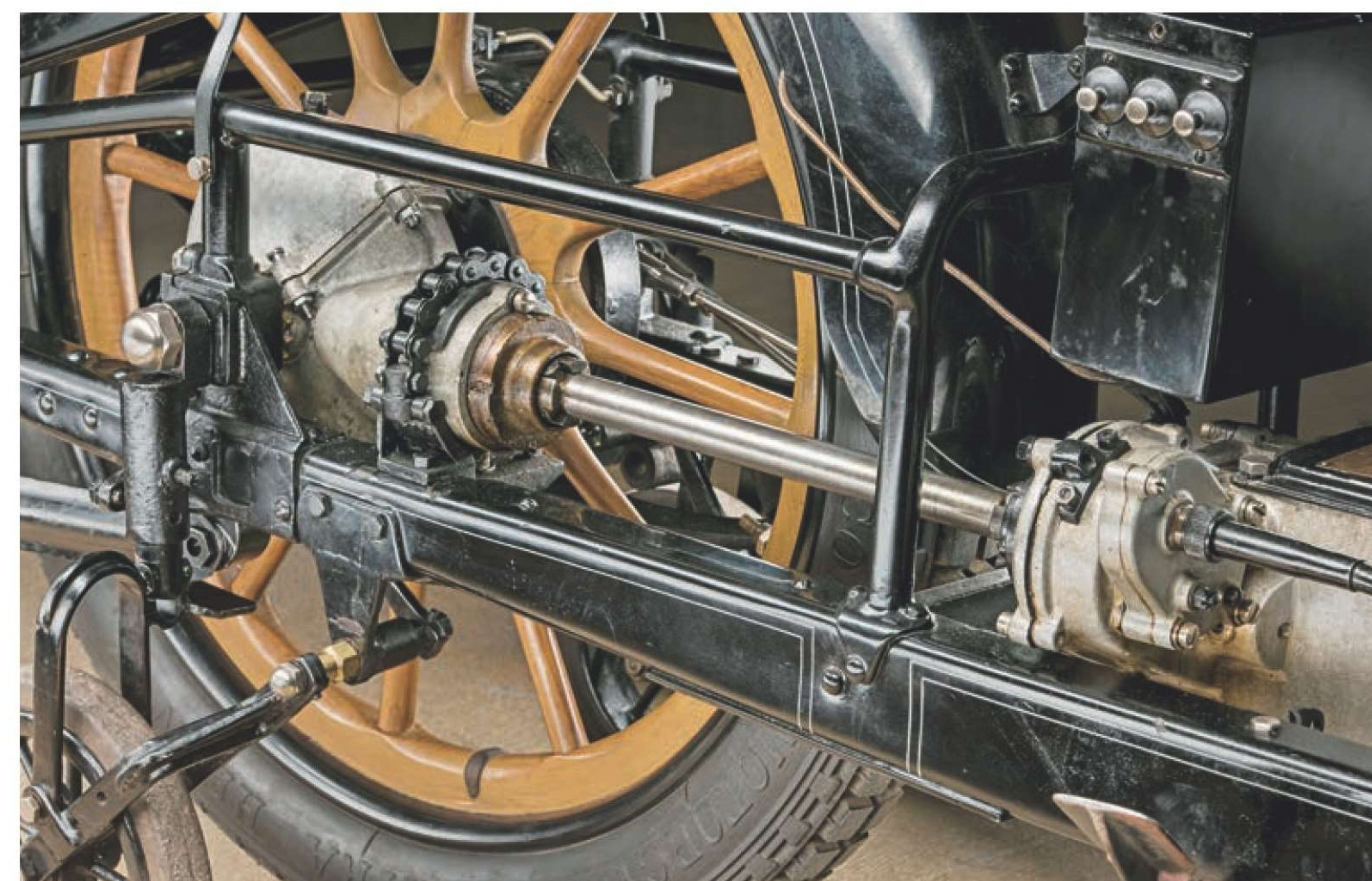


Militaire

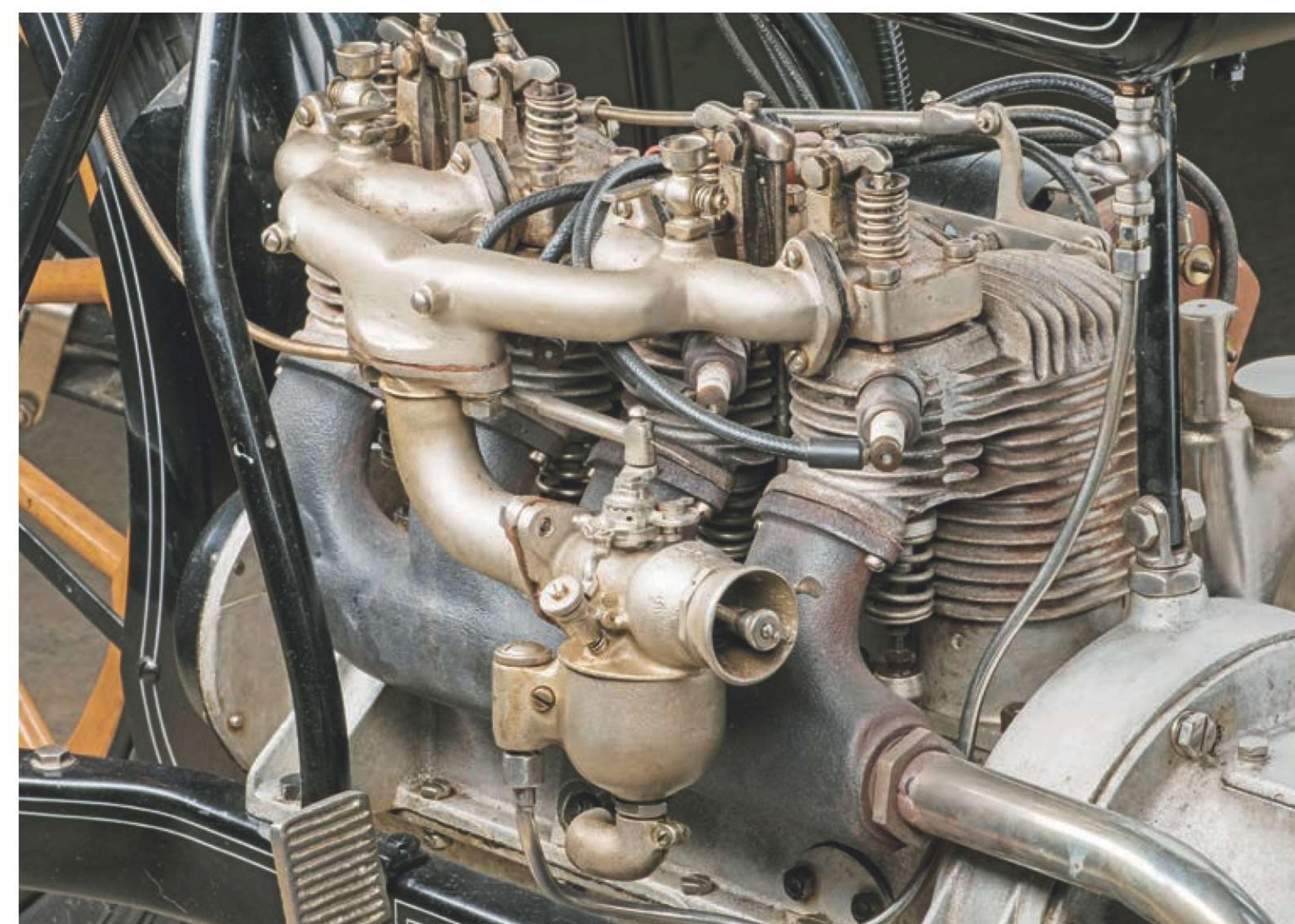




Starting out as the “Deluxe” in 1910, the Militaire designs were built by four different owners in Ohio, Missouri, New York, and New Jersey in seven years, but ultimately lost out to the bigger marques.



The wooden wheels of the Militaire were a tried-and-true military treatment. The wheels were made from hand-selected, second growth, straight-grain hickory.



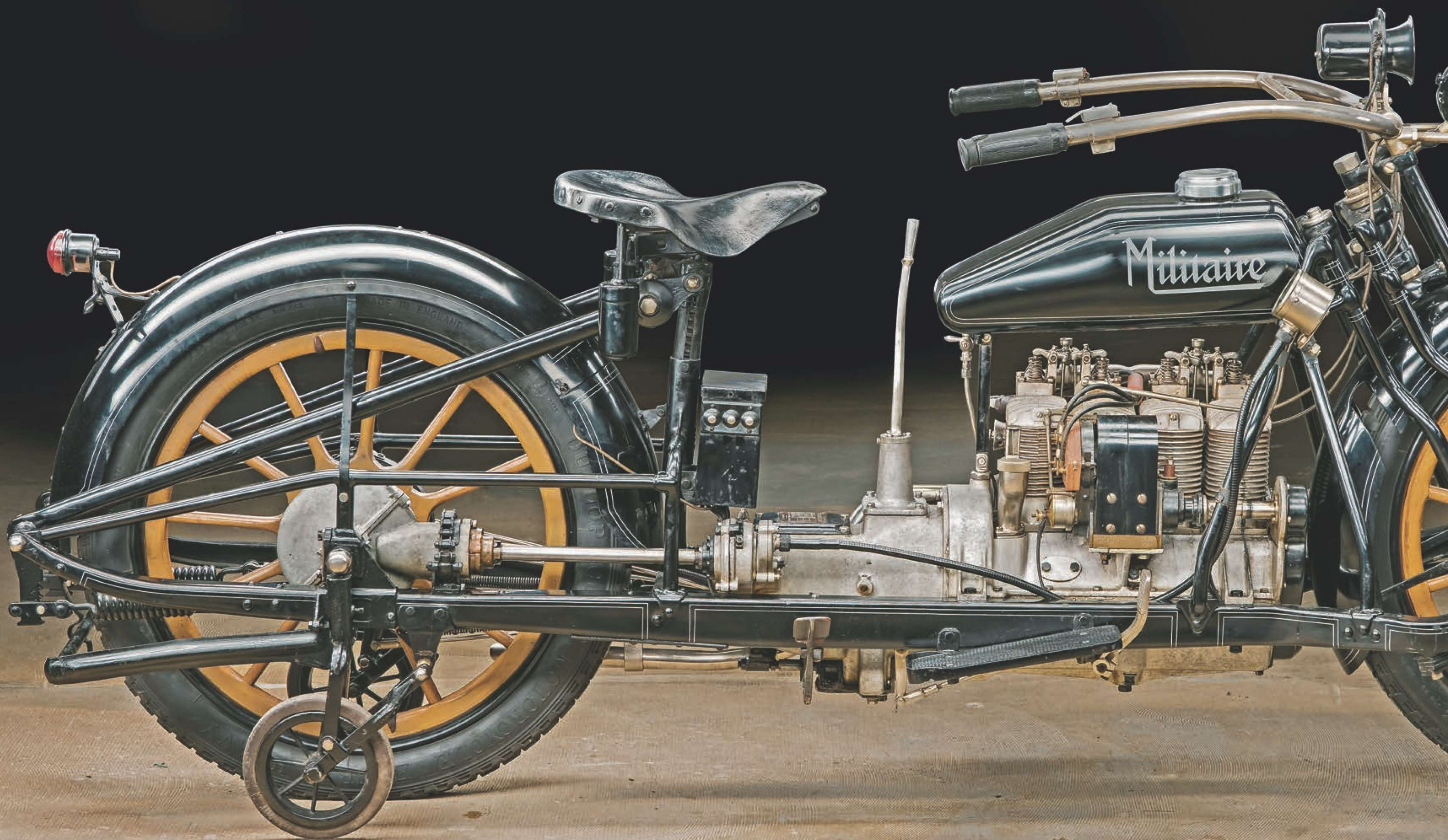
A 1,000cc four with 11.5 horsepower, the Militaire featured unit construction, three forward gears, one reverse gear, and pressure-fed lubrication. The intake-over-exhaust design helped with cooling.



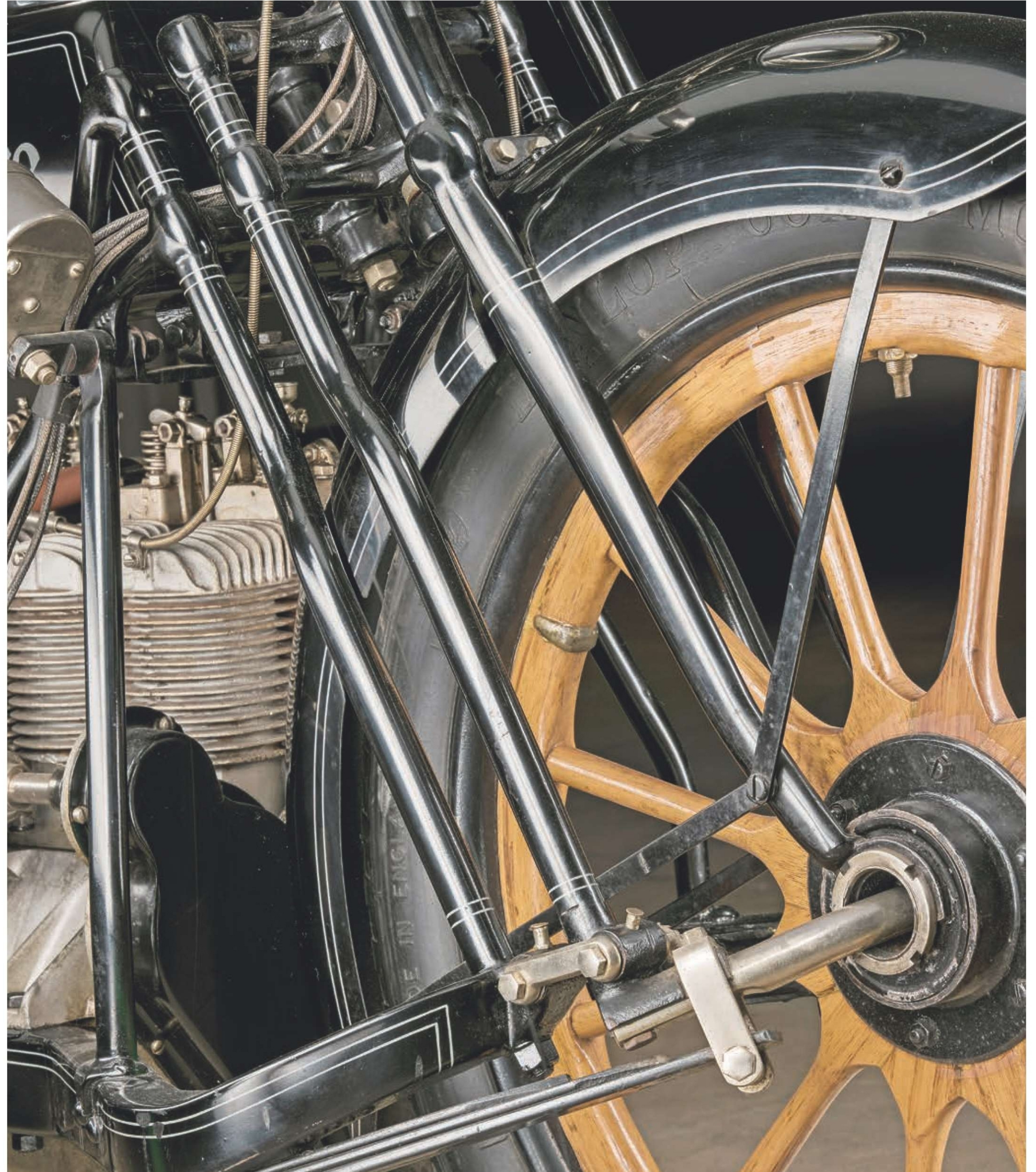


The Militaire's idler wheels constituted an attempt to make balancing a motorcycling seem easy and safe. The wheels could be lifted and lowered by the operator while seated.









Above: The Militaire designers used a patented, pivoting front axle that made it possible to use a channel-steel chassis, unit-construction engine, and shaft drive.

Left: The heavy steel frame and well-distributed weight of engine, transmission, and drivetrain components gave the 1915 Militaire great balance and a low center of gravity.





The fully functioning speedometer and careful attention to fit and finish set the Militaire apart. Unfortunately, it was just a little too expensive and too much like a car; it never sold well in the US.

#### 1915 MILITAIRE SPECIFICATIONS:

**Engine type:**

Air-cooled, in-line 4-cylinder

**Displacement:**

1,100 cubic centimeters

**Horsepower:**

11.5

**Special feature:**

Shaft drive, hickory wood rims with a pair of outrigger rear wheels.

Right: Originally billed as a “two-wheeled car,” early iterations of these big, heavy Militaire machines sported steering wheels instead of handlebars. This 1915 model was the first with handlebars.



